

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Royal Gorge Field Office
3028 E. Main Street
Canon City, CO 81212**

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

NUMBER: DOI-BLM-CO-F02-2014-0021 CX

CASEFILE/PROJECT NUMBER (optional):

PROJECT NAME: Buffalo Hill Commercial Timber Sale

PLANNING UNIT: Royal Gorge Field Office

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: T.13S., R.74W., Sec 19, 6th PM

APPLICANT: BLM

INTRODUCTION:

Historically, the forests of the Rocky Mountain West were known to be less dense, consisting of larger and older trees than the forests of present times. There were dense stands of trees, but these were intermixed in a mosaic pattern of diverse forest age classes and openings. Whereas, the forests of today are characterized as even-aged stands with little age class diversity and many are overstocked with too many trees per acre. During the settlement of the South Plate River drainage most of the larger trees were removed for infrastructure and energy, thereby altering the natural processes. Consequently, most of the old growth trees are gone and the older/larger trees seen today were probably too small to be utilized at settlement times. These facts serve as a historical reminder of how different the forests of today are compared to those prior to settlement.

Prior to European settlement of the South Plate River drainage wildfires played an important ecological role in maintaining the function and pattern of the vegetation on the landscape throughout the Rocky Mountains. Wildfires reduced natural fuel accumulations, maintained forest health by clearing smaller understory trees, recycled nutrients, maintained meadows and parks, improved wildlife habitats, and assured a diversity of forest age classes by creating early seral habitat for young tree establishment. The past 100 years of wildfire suppression, cattle grazing, timber harvests and the recent urbanization of the West have interrupted the natural frequency and intensity of wildfires. As a result the forests have become overstocked with numerous small diameter trees, most less than 100 years old. As these smaller trees compete with the larger trees for moisture, during drought periods, the larger trees become stressed, subjecting them to increased risk of bark beetle attack. These small diameter trees also provide a ladder for

wildfire to move into the forest crown, a prescription for a catastrophic crown fire. Crown fires are the most destructive and difficult to control and pose the greatest catastrophic risk to growing populations and threaten private property adjacent to these forests. Therefore, given the human induced changes to the forest and the current state of the forests in Colorado, namely the lack of recent disturbance, these forests are in desperate need of multiple silvicultural treatments, designed to induce the effects of long lost processes, such as fire.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The Proposed Action is to mechanically thin 21 acres of mixed conifer forests in 1 unit consisting of Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine using conventional logging equipment through a commercial timber sale (See project map). This sale shall be named Buffalo Hill Commercial Timber Sale and it will be a competitive bid sale which is likely to be out for bids in FY14. This sale is planned as a 2 year sale due to the quantity of timber and size of the proposal.

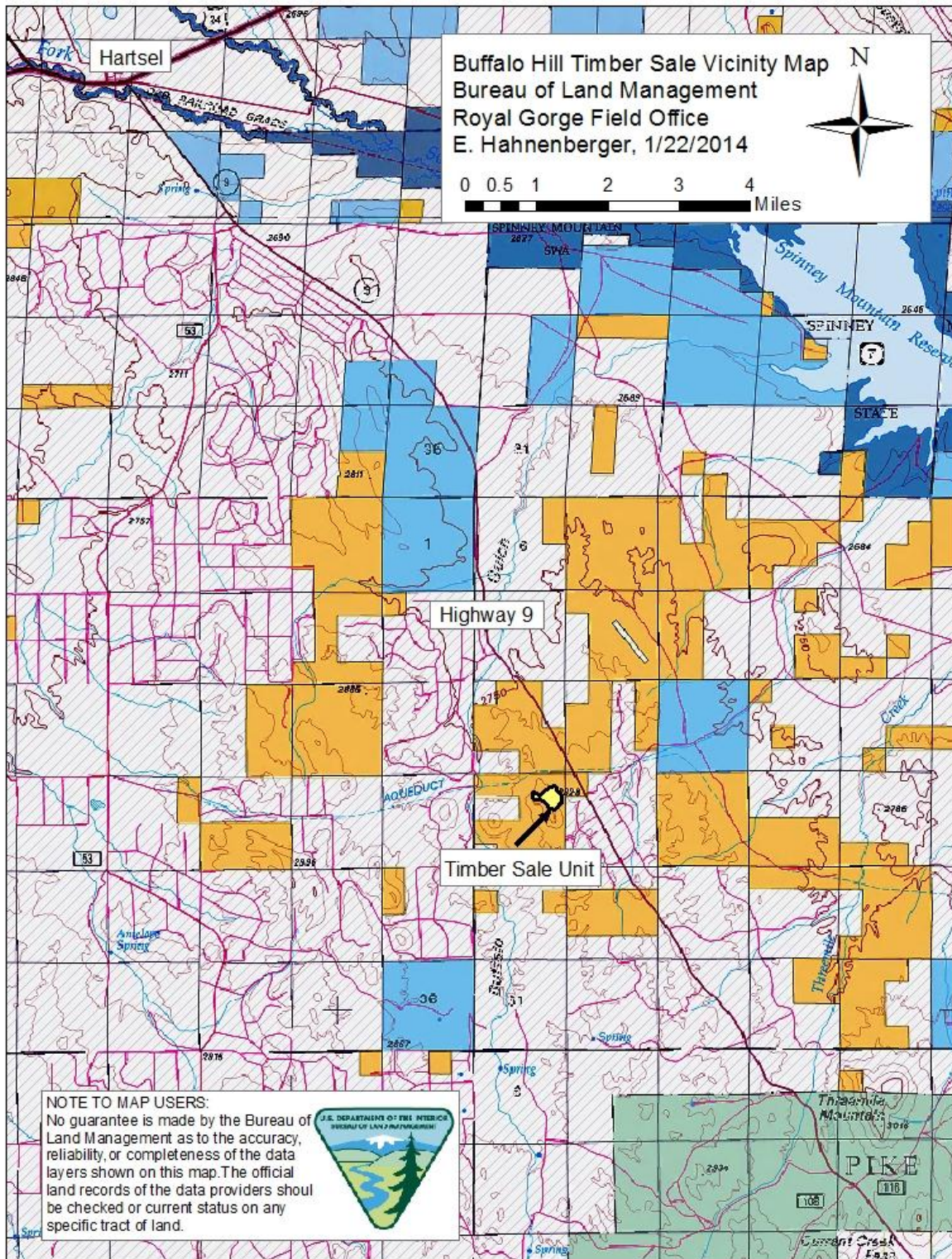
The proposed treatment is thinning, considered an intermediate treatment method that involves the removal of a portion of the larger conifer trees to meet a desired spacing which relates to the number of trees per acre. This action would improve forest health by removing large trees with evidence of insect, disease or declining health (ex. small crown ratio). All aspen shall be considered protected reserve trees.

Existing BLM and County roads shall be utilized for the forest product removal. The existing BLM roads shall be maintained and improved to facilitate the forest product removal. All temporary roads created to remove forest products shall be closed to motor vehicles upon completion of the timber harvest activity. Trees are to be harvested by a commercial logging company. The work is likely to be performed with chainsaws, skidders, tractors, pickup trucks, trailers, log loaders and/or log hauling trucks

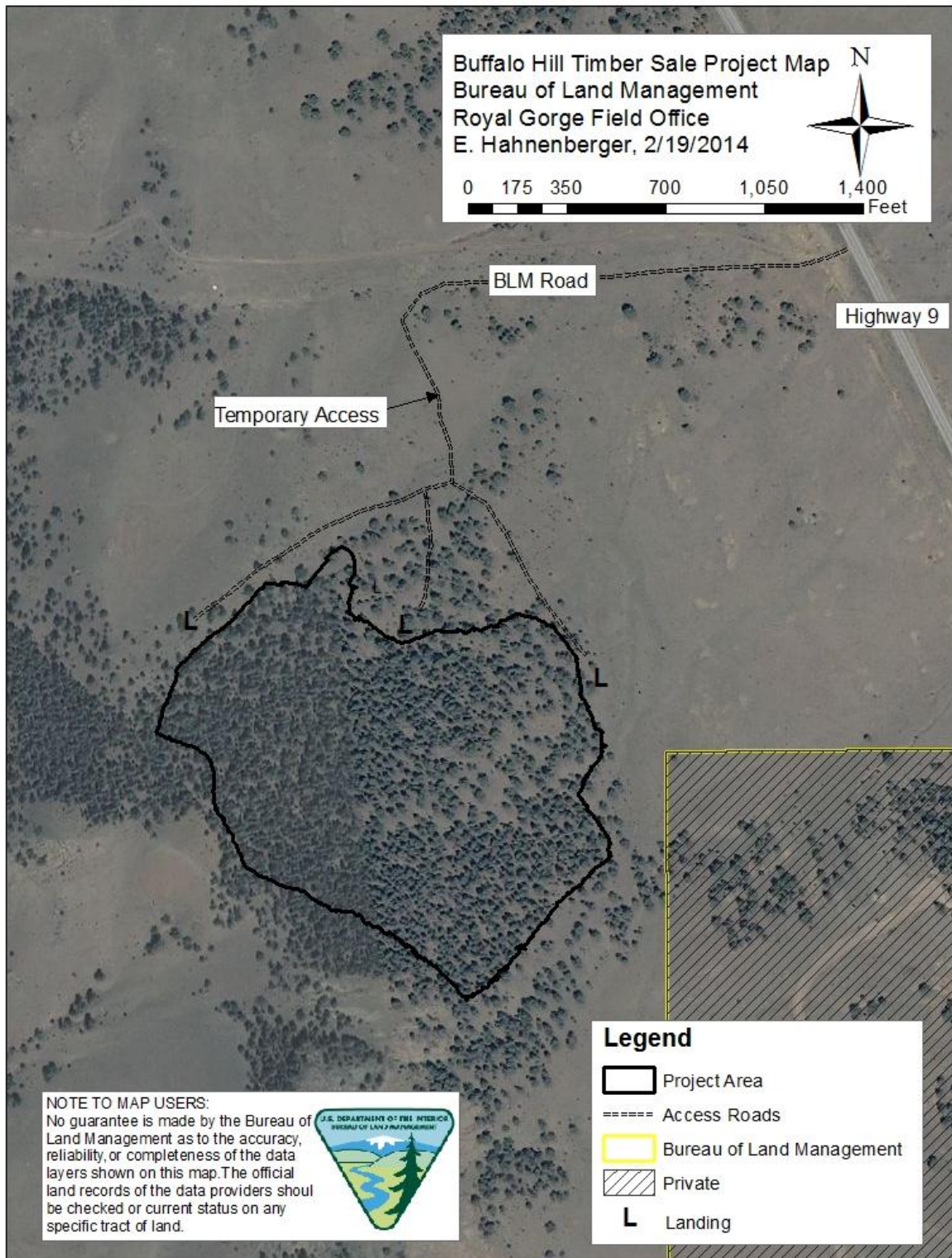
The slash created from the activity shall be piled where it can be burned effectively in suitable weather and not damage the reserve trees. The piles shall be created at the landings or within the harvest units. These piles should be approximately 15 feet in diameter, and will be constructed to minimize the incorporation of soil into the piles. Piles may be allowed to cure for a season to minimize emissions.

All known improvements will be protected or repaired if damaged, including but not limited to fences, gates, watering facilities, property corners, etc. This parcel is currently not permitted for livestock grazing. All gates will remain closed during this period except as necessary for entering and leaving the project.

Vicinity Map



Project Map



PLAN CONFORMANCE REVIEW:

Name of Plan: Royal Gorge Resource Management Plan

Date Approved: 5/13/1996

Decision Number: 4-1, 4-12, 4-13

Decision Language: Vegetation will be managed to accomplish other BLM initiatives i. e., riparian, wildlife, etc.. Productive forested lands will be managed for sustained-yield. A portion of the forested lands will be available for intensive management.

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION REVIEW: This proposed action is listed as a Categorical Exclusion in DOI Departmental Manual Part 516 Chapter 11.9 (C7). None of the following exceptions in 516 DM 2, Appendix 2, apply.

Exclusion Criteria	YES	NO
1. Have significant impacts on public health or safety.		X
2. Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation, or refuge lands; wilderness areas; lands with wilderness characteristics; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands; floodplains; national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas.		X
3. Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources.		X
4. Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks.		X
5. Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.		X
6. Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects.		X
7. Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by either the bureau or office.		X
8. Have significant impacts on species listed, or proposed to be listed, on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or have significant impacts on designated Critical Habitat for these species.		X
9. Violate a Federal law, or a State, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.		X
10. Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations.		X
11. Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect		X

the physical integrity of such sacred sites.		
12. Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species.		X

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM REVIEW			
NAME	TITLE	AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY	Initials/date
Matt Rustand	Wildlife Biologist	Terrestrial Wildlife, T&E, Migratory Birds	MR, 1/23/2014
Jeff Williams	Range Management Spec.	Range, Vegetation, Farmland	NA
Chris Cloninger	Range Management Spec.	Range, Vegetation, Farmland	CC, 1/23/14
John Lamman	Range Management Spec.	Weeds	JL, 02/03/2014
Dave Gilbert	Fisheries Biologist	Aquatic Wildlife, Riparian/Wetlands	DG, 1/23/14
Stephanie Carter	Geologist	Minerals, Paleontology, Waste Hazardous or Solid	-----
Melissa Smeins	Geologist	Minerals, Paleontology	MJS, 2/10/2014
John Smeins	Hydrologist	Hydrology, Water Quality/Rights, Soils	JS, 1/23/14
Ty Webb	Prescribed Fire Specialist	Air Quality	TW, 1/21/14
Jeff Covington	Cadastral Surveyor	Cadastral Survey	JC, 1/23/14
Kalem Lenard	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Recreation, Wilderness, LWCs, Visual, ACEC, W&S Rivers,	KL, 2/3/2014
John Nahomenuk	River Manager	Recreation, Wilderness, LWCs, Visual, ACEC, W&S Rivers	NA
Ken Reed	Forester	Forestry	1/22/14
Monica Weimer	Archaeologist	Cultural, Native American	NA
Michael Troyer	Archaeologist	Cultural, Native American	MDT 3/14/14
Greg Valladeres	Realty Specialist	Realty	GDV 04/04/2014
Steve Cunningham	Law Enforcement Ranger	Law Enforcement	SC 1/26/14
Dennis Page	Fire Management Officer	Fire	DP, 1/23/14

REMARKS:

Cadastral: This is an original survey which the subdivisional lines were surveyed in 1874. GCDB reliability is +/- 75 ft.

Cultural Resources: No historic properties were found in the area of potential effect [see reports CR-RG-10-036 (P) and CR-RG-14-086 (N)]. Therefore, the proposed undertaking will have no effect on any historic properties (those eligible for the NRHP).

Native American Religious Concerns: No possible traditional cultural properties were located during the cultural resources inventory (see above). There is no other known evidence that suggests the project area holds special significance for Native Americans.

Threatened and Endangered Species: There are no records of any federally listed or BLM sensitive species within or near the project area. The Proposed Action will not result in impacts to TES species.

Migratory Birds: To be in compliance with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and the Memorandum of Understanding between BLM and USFWS required by Executive Order 13186, BLM must avoid actions, where possible, that result in a “take” of migratory birds. Pursuant to BLM Instruction Memorandum 2008-050, to reduce impacts to Birds of Conservation Concern (BCC), no habitat disturbance (removal of vegetation such as timber, brush, or grass) is allowed during the periods of May 15 - July 15, the breeding and brood rearing season for most Colorado migratory birds. The provision will not apply to completion activities in disturbed areas that were initiated prior to May 15 and continue into the 60-day period.

An exception to this timing limitation will be granted if nesting surveys conducted no more than one week prior to vegetation-disturbing activities indicate no nesting within 30 meters (100 feet) of the area to be disturbed. Surveys shall be conducted by a qualified breeding bird surveyor between sunrise and 10:00 a.m. under favorable conditions.

Lands with Wilderness Characteristics: Inventories for wilderness characteristics were updated in 2013. It was determined that the project area does not possess wilderness characteristics.

Geologic and Mineral Resources: The federal minerals in the proposed project area are open to mineral location, therefore requiring coordination between surface uses as applicable. As of February 10, 2014 there are no unpatented mining claims within the proposed project boundary, however, if any claim markers are encountered during project implementation they cannot be disturbed.

Wastes, Hazardous or Solid: If the project involves oil or fuel usage, transfer or storage, an adequate spill kit and shovels are required to be onsite during project implementation. The project proponent will be responsible for adhering to all applicable local, State and Federal regulations in the event of a spill, which includes following the proper notification procedures in BLM’s Spill Contingency Plan.

Lands and Realty: Within the planned project area is the Homestake water pipeline right-of-way (COC-0122222). The right-of-way consists of a 66-inch buried pipeline within a 50-foot corridor and associated access road. The associated access road will be part of the access route for the current project. The pipeline right-of-way itself is cleared of all vegetation and no dirt excavation is necessary to complete the thinning project. The pipeline access road will be

utilized and work will only be performed when the soils are either dry or frozen. Impacts to the right-of-way are not anticipated.

COMPLIANCE PLAN (optional):

NAME OF PREPARER: Ken Reed

SUPERVISORY REVIEW: Melissa K.S. Garcia

NAME OF ENVIRONMENTAL COORDINATOR: /s/ Martin Weimer

DATE: 4/17/14

DECISION AND RATIONALE: I have reviewed this Categorical Exclusion and have decided to implement the Proposed Action.

This action is listed in the Department Manual as an action that may be categorically excluded. I have evaluated the action relative to the 10 criteria listed above and have determined that it does not represent an exception and is, therefore, categorically excluded from further environmental analysis.

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL: /s/ Keith E. Berger
Keith E. Berger, Field Manager

DATE SIGNED: 4/18/14